



# Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA)

Your Guide to the GEPA  
March 2004

This pamphlet answers the most frequently asked questions about the Grade Eight Proficiency Assessment (GEPA) and provides information about its importance to your child's education. This information explains what the GEPA measures, why it is given, how the results are reported, and why it is important for your child to do well.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### 1. What is the GEPA?

The GEPA is a state test given to eighth graders to measure whether they have gained the knowledge and skills identified in the Core Curriculum Content Standards. These standards, adopted by the State Board of Education, identify what students should know and be able to do at the end of the fourth, eighth, and twelfth grades. The GEPA replaced the Grade 8 Early Warning Test (EWT), which was administered from 1991 to 1998. The GEPA will help determine whether your child is making satisfactory progress toward mastering the skills he or she will need to pass the new graduation test, the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA). The HSPA measures eleventh-grade achievement of the Core Curriculum Content Standards. The GEPA can help the school determine—and let you know well in advance—if your child will need additional help in order to pass the HSPA in the eleventh grade. In March 2004, eighth-grade students will take the GEPA and receive scores in Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, and Science.

### 2. Why is my child required to take the GEPA?

In 1988, the New Jersey State Legislature passed a law (18A: 7C-6.2) requiring that a test be given to all eighth-grade students in public schools in New Jersey to assess their

progress toward mastering the skills they will need to graduate from high school. These skills are now defined in the Core Curriculum Content Standards in the areas of Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, Science, Visual and Performing Arts, Social Studies, Health and Physical Education, World Languages, and Workplace Readiness.

### 3. In what other ways are the GEPA test results used?

Local school districts use the results to determine the appropriateness and strength of the local curriculum and to develop remedial programs to help students improve their knowledge and skills. The results are also used to satisfy federal requirements under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

### 4. Are children classified as special education required to take the GEPA?

The GEPA is designed to give your school information about how well all children have mastered the Core Curriculum Content Standards, including children with educational disabilities. Special education students will be working toward achieving the standards at levels appropriate for them and with accommodations they need. These accommodations are defined in their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). The accommodations should be the same as those used by these students in other classroom testing, and may include Braille, extended testing time, or a different testing site.

Every student with disabilities must take each subject area of the GEPA unless exempted by the IEP because his or her disability is so severe that he or she has not been instructed in the knowledge and skills tested and cannot complete any of the item types on the test. Parents of children with disabilities should discuss participation in the GEPA, and

necessary accommodations, at the child's IEP meeting.

While most special education children will participate in the GEPA testing, there is a small percentage of children with the most severe disabilities for whom some of the content standards are not appropriate. The Department of Education has identified those standards that are appropriate for students with severe disabilities. The department has developed a different kind of test for these children to measure their achievements. The new assessment for these special education students is the Alternate Proficiency Assessment (APA).

#### **5. Are students identified as limited English proficient (LEP) required to take the GEPA?**

All limited English proficient (LEP) students must take the test. LEP students may need accommodations during testing, which can include a translation dictionary, translation of test directions, extended testing time, or a small group testing environment. Parents should meet with the school bilingual/ESL coordinator to discuss appropriate testing accommodations for LEP students.

#### **6. When is the GEPA given?**

The GEPA is given to all eighth graders in March over a five-day period. Your child will spend approximately two hours each day taking the test. The scheduled test dates for March 2004 are:

##### Regular Test Dates

March 8, 9, 10, and 11, 2004

##### Make-Up Test Dates

March 15, 16, 17, and 18, 2004

#### **7. What does the GEPA measure?**

The March 2004 GEPA measures achievement of eighth-grade knowledge and skills in the areas of Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, and Science.

### **SCIENCE**

The Science section will be administered on March 8, 2004. The items will measure

students' knowledge and skills in three areas—life sciences, physical sciences, and earth sciences. The Science section contains two types of items. Most of the items are multiple-choice. Others are open-ended and require students to record their own answers or to explain or illustrate scientific concepts.

### **MATHEMATICS**

The Mathematics section will be administered on March 9, 2004. The items will measure your child's ability to solve problems by applying mathematical concepts. The skill areas for Mathematics include: number sense; spatial sense and geometry; data analysis; and patterns, functions, and algebra. The Mathematics section contains two types of items. Most are multiple-choice. Others are open-ended and require students to record their own answers or to explain or illustrate how they solve mathematical problems.

### **LANGUAGE ARTS LITERACY**

On March 10 and 11, 2004, students will take the GEPA's Language Arts Literacy section, which will measure students' achievements in reading and writing. The reading materials require students to read passages and to respond to related items. The passages are selected from published books, newspapers, and magazines, as well as everyday text. Some of the items are multiple-choice, while others require students to write their answers in their own words. These questions are called "open-ended" items.

The writing activities require students to write an extended response to a picture they view, to write a persuasive piece, and to revise and edit the text of others.

#### **8. What types of scores and reports will I receive from the GEPA?**

Your student will receive an Individual Student Report that contains his/her scores in Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, and Science. For all three sections of the test, there will be a total score and subtotals for all the clusters of skills. The total scores will be reported in one of three proficiency levels—Advanced Proficient, Proficient, or Partially Proficient. Scores that fall in the Partially

Proficient level indicate that a student has not met the minimum level of proficiency based on this test performance and the student is likely to need additional help to further develop the skills needed to pass the HSPA. A copy of this report must be made available to you; another is kept at the school in your child's file.

### **9. What happens if my child is Partially Proficient in one or more sections of the GEPA?**

Students who are Partially Proficient in one or more sections of the GEPA will be evaluated by the school to determine how to strengthen any skill deficiencies. The school determines final instructional placement for your child by evaluating many factors in conjunction with these test scores.

District boards of education shall provide appropriate instruction to improve skills and knowledge for students performing below the established levels of student proficiency in any content area on the statewide assessments.

### **10. If my child does well on the GEPA, will he/she still have to take the HSPA?**

The GEPA tests the skills that are important for eighth graders to have in order to eventually succeed on the HSPA. The GEPA questions measuring these skills are designed to be appropriate for eighth graders. The HSPA measures eleventh-grade skills. Therefore, your child's GEPA scores cannot substitute for his or her scores on the HSPA. In addition, passing the HSPA is a requirement for high school graduation.

### **11. How can I find out whether my child is progressing toward learning the required skills?**

You should speak first to your child's teachers, particularly those who teach mathematics, English, science, and remedial skills (if applicable). Other school staff who could help you are the principal, the guidance counselor, the basic skills coordinator, the mathematics, science, or English department chairperson, the English-as-a-second-

language (ESL) teacher or the bilingual/ESL coordinator if your child has limited English proficiency.

### **12. What can I do at home to help my child learn the skills measured by the GEPA?**

Your child's teachers can suggest specific ways in which you can help your child. In general, you can help by:

- showing an interest in his or her work,
- letting your child know that you have high expectations for his or her work,
- providing a study area,
- setting homework and study time every day,
- asking to see your child's assignments and test results,
- making sure your child attends school regularly, and
- congratulating your child on his or her efforts and achievements.

### **13. Where can I get help to understand the GEPA scores my child receives?**

When you receive your child's GEPA scores, you will also receive a detailed written explanation of what the scores mean. If the explanation does not answer all your questions, you should contact the school guidance counselor or your child's teachers.

### **14. How will the proficiency levels be set for each test section?**

Proficiency levels for the Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics sections of the GEPA were established in June 1999. Using student performance information from the March 1999 administration of the test, committees of experienced educators recommended the proficiency levels for each of the test sections. With the committees' recommendations, the State Board of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, adopted the standards which established the proficiency levels. A procedure called statistical equating is used to make sure that all future GEPA Language Arts Literacy and Mathematics tests are at the same level

of difficulty as the tests administered in March 1999.

Proficiency levels for the Science section of the GEPA were established in July 2000. Using student performance information from the March 2000 administration of the test, a committee of experienced educators recommended the proficiency levels for the Science section. With the committee's recommendations, the State Board of Education, in consultation with the Commissioner of Education, adopted the standards which established the proficiency levels. A procedure called statistical equating is used to make sure that all future GEPA Science tests are at the same level of difficulty as the one administered in March 2000.

#### **15. How is the GEPA scored?**

The multiple-choice items are machine scored by a company hired by the New Jersey Department of Education.

Student responses to all open-ended items, including the writing responses, are scored by a company contracted by the department. This company has a staff of highly-trained scorers who must have at least a bachelor's degree and who must undergo rigorous and ongoing training and monitoring during the scoring process. Each open-ended item is read independently by two scorers. Responses are evaluated on the completeness, accuracy, and relevance of the information provided by the student.

The student's scores on the multiple-choice and open-ended items in each test section

are combined for a total Language Arts Literacy raw score, a total Mathematics raw score, and a total Science raw score. The raw scores are converted into scaled scores, which are the scores that are reported for students in Language Arts Literacy, Mathematics, and Science.

#### **16. How can I find out more about the GEPA?**

The New Jersey Department of Education has developed materials to help parents and teachers prepare students for the GEPA. These materials (this pamphlet, for example) are provided through your child's school. Further information about the GEPA and your child's progress toward the development of the skills tested is available at your local school or district office.

Information about the GEPA is also available from the New Jersey Department of Education, Office of Assessment, PO Box 500, Trenton, New Jersey, 08625-0500, or at the department's Web site at [www.state.nj.us/education](http://www.state.nj.us/education)

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